

# **The Reflective Practitioner: The challenges of supporting Public Sector Senior Leaders as they engage in reflective practice**

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## **Abstract**

**Purpose** – This paper explores the challenges, issues and benefits of reflective practice faced by work-based practitioners undertaking negotiated experiential learning. The study focuses upon the case of a ground-breaking UK based Senior Leader Master’s Degree Apprenticeship (SLMDA) programme which requires learners to develop and apply reflective practice skills through comprehensive work-based learning and research activities. Degree apprenticeships represent a significant opportunity for providers and employers to become more closely aligned in the joint development and promotion of innovative learning opportunities, yet the efficacy of individually negotiated, experiential learning and reflective practice for senior leaders within a challenging healthcare environment remains relatively unexplored from a tripartite perspective. This paper investigates the role of reflective practice within a leading degree apprenticeship programme which embraces this pedagogic approach and considers the potential barriers and benefits for learners and their organisations.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper begins by discussing the nature of reflective practice in the workplace and explores the growing importance of this activity in contemporary organisations. Theoretical and conceptual foundations relating to experiential learning and reflective practice are analysed and discussed. The SLMDA programme and NHS case organisation are described in detail. Qualitative data drawn from semi-structured interviews undertaken with learners, employers and Personal Academic Tutors (PATs) is then analysed to identify the key issues and challenges encountered.

**Findings** – The study identifies the benefits of reflective practice, explores the challenges and issues that act as barriers to reflective practice and highlights the importance of the role of the Personal Academic Tutor (PAT) and that of employers in supporting and developing reflective practice in one of the first SLMDA programmes to launch within the UK.

**Originality/value** – Although reflective practice and work-based research have attracted considerable scholarly activity, investigations have overwhelmingly been focused upon professions such as teaching and nursing and have explored challenges and issues from the perspective of the provider. This study explores reflective practice from the viewpoint of learners, employers and PATs and thereby seeks to compliment and expand current understanding by developing a more holistic approach. This work will inform future programme design, practitioner skills development and employer support procedures as learners plan and prepare to facilitate work- based research projects within their organisations.

**Key Words** – reflective practice; National Health Service (NHS);

senior leaders master's degree apprenticeship; experiential work-based learning; personal academic tutors, workplace mentors.

## **Introduction**

The introduction of degree apprenticeships in the UK is one of the biggest opportunities in decades for educational providers to review and adapt executive, sponsored and part-time programme provision. The requirement for employers to influence the design and development of programmes relevant to their business needs offers educators a critical role in collaboratively developing new talent, widening participation and instilling the habits of continuous professional excellence through lifelong learning.

Whilst the UK, Germany and Australia have historically delivered vocational apprenticeships, this is the first time that UK non-technical apprenticeships have become a funding and delivery mechanism for degree and master's programmes. Funding is sourced via an employer levy of 0.5%, payable from April 2017 by organisations with a payroll exceeding £3 million, whilst smaller organisations may share the cost of training with the government via co-investment (Education and Skills Funding Agency, 2019). These transformative educational policies enabled the Senior Leaders Master's Degree Apprenticeship (SLMDA) to be delivered across England from 2018, representing new apprenticeship provision at Level 7. Current statistics indicate that the number of enrolments exceeded 4,000 by January 2020, with 61% from the public sector (Chartered Management Institute, 2020).

The launch of degree apprenticeship programmes has not been without its challenges. The levy contributions made by public sector bodies such as the NHS has attracted a high degree of public and political scrutiny, with the Public Service Union UNISON criticising the £256m NHS levy, with only £54m allocated to apprenticeships, leaving 79% unspent (UNISON, 2019). The inception of management degree apprenticeships has forced Universities to adapt pedagogic strategies and employ work-based learning frameworks to ensure curricula meet new political apprenticeship reforms whilst meeting increasing demand. Concerns have been raised by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) over the repositioning and re-badging of existing programmes as apprenticeships, resulting in a major consultation and reform of the SLMDA Standard by 2021 (IfATE, 2020).

Crucially, 20% of apprentices' time must be devoted to "off the job" learning, derived from a combination of University and employer led activities to create a cohesive, skills-driven

curricula. The Standard implicitly implies that apprentices' line managers should develop and adopt new approaches to support learning and ensure the effective synthesis of higher level work-related study with full-time employment. The acquisition of Level 7 qualifications juxtaposed with performance expectations at the most senior levels in the workplace, has led to a greater reliance upon line managers and personal academic tutors for effective guidance and support (Rowe et al, 2017). Nevertheless, very few researchers have explored the outcomes of co-designed programmes despite the importance of collaboration between employer and the University in supporting learners (Plewa, Muros and Davey, 2014). Similarly, Talbot (2014) emphasises employers' historically sporadic interest in work-based learning with limited support and training structures. Curtis (2017) exposes a similar perception from the learners' perspective with 57% of apprentices citing insufficient employer support, contributing towards non-completion rates approaching one third of all apprenticeships.

Other defining characteristics of the SLMDA emphasise the importance of the pedagogic framework adopted by the University. Until recently, the primary focus of the MBA was based upon developing an understanding of the strategic contribution of the key business functions of human resources, finance, marketing and operations. Despite the qualification's obvious significance in driving workplace change, the majority of MBA curricula have not been sufficiently responsive in terms of their design and content to meet the complex needs of specific contexts (Rubin and Dierdorff, 2009; Iglesias, Entrialgo and Müller, 2020). This is in contrast to other curricula, such as nursing, medicine and social work, that have acknowledged the importance of contextualising sector specific challenges and issues by utilising reflective processes and critical enquiry (The Quality Assurance Agency, 2017). Yet, innovative programme design can enable situated leadership development through innovative work-based learning pedagogies. A key aspect here is the need for work-based learners to engage in meaningful and effective reflective practice enabling learners to develop increased self-awareness and a clearer understanding of themselves and those around them (Schedlitzki, 2019). According to Helyer (2016) becoming a reflective practitioner is of primary importance for those engaged in work-based learning. Specifically, they argue that reflective practice enables work-based learners to cope with the challenges of twenty first century employment by becoming more self-aware, receptive and adaptable. In addition, reflective practice has the potential to enable employees to become more resilient, cope with change,

maintain skills currency and increase output by linking knowledge to production (Edward and Hercelinsky, 2007).

Given the complexities of contemporary organisational life, the ability for managers to know themselves and be able to view themselves as others do are crucial skills for those aiming to become successful managers and leaders in an increasingly turbulent environment. Apprenticeship standards require evidence that academic knowledge, theories and models have been applied within the workplace, which in itself demands that learners become critically reflective in order to identify how skills have developed within their role (Harrison, Hughes, Rowe and Saivea, 2020). Although critical self-reflection can be a challenging undertaking the process can have very powerful and far reaching outcomes. In particular, critical self-reflection provides individuals with a great opportunity to learn from both successes and mistakes. Here, the role of the PAT is of particular relevance in pro-actively supporting development of learners' cognitive capabilities to reflect on past and present performance by using reflection as a 'tool for learning' that informs next steps, a crucial skill for those aspiring to senior positions.

Despite the importance of reflective practice, nascent studies into degree apprenticeships have largely focused upon issues such as programme content and the co-ordination and integration of apprentices in the workplace. More recently, Schedlitzki (2019) examined the potential benefits of reflective practice in developing apprentice leaders, specifically with regard to the opportunity provided by the learning portfolio, highlighting the need for an evaluation of the development of apprentices' reflexive skills, and how they might impact upon individual and organisational practices. In order to address this lacuna and develop a clearer understanding of the role of reflection in the apprenticeship context, this paper sets out to explore the role of the University in developing reflective practitioners in the discipline of business and management. It draws upon the perspectives and roles of the three stakeholders – the apprentice, the employer and the PAT to examine the challenges, issues and benefits of reflective practice for public sector employees undertaking a SLMDA programme at a University in the North West of England.

## **Literature Review**

The literature review explores work-based learning in the context of Senior Leader Apprenticeships and identifies the key challenges and issues faced by students, tutors and employers involved in such programmes.

The introduction of the SLMDA has given employers an exclusive opportunity to influence programmes, ensuring the inclusion of relevant skills enhancing pedagogic strategies and measures of their efficacy. Experienced and committed employers have already identified desired skillsets for senior leaders, informing the design of the approved Standard (IfATE, 2020). The Standard focuses upon performance with notable reference to underpinning psychological conditions, crucial to identifying the various concepts linking knowledge, skills and behaviours. As a result, a more holistic concept of employer requirements can be embedded into the curriculum to cultivate employability, ensuring that both practical and theoretical competencies are tested. In turn, Universities can explore and develop reciprocal work-related curricula and pedagogies to enable learners to develop advanced cognitive skills, including critical reflection and problem solving (Gregory, 2016).

Garnett (2001, p.103) describes work-based learning as “a process for recognising, creating and applying knowledge through and for work”, assimilating the contextual constraints as well as the complexities of academic scrutiny of context and individual. Unwin and Fuller (2003) emphasise the enormous potential to embrace all forms of learning stimulated by workplace demands, represented by an increasingly diverse variety of different partnership arrangements and contexts, delivered through a range of modes, levels and assessments. Yet, the challenge for academics is the adaptation away from the deep-rooted continuum of “process based” teaching towards the growing array of experiential and reflective work-based learning, spanning sectors and specialisms, designed in collaboration with employers to meet degree apprenticeship requirements (Bravenboer, 2018).

Boud and Solomon (2001) conceptualised the key characteristics of work-based learning long before the notion of degree apprenticeships was conceived. Even so, the latest programmes mirror Boud and Solomon (2001) emphasising the need for: contractually binding partnerships; employee learners with individually negotiated learning plans; bespoke curricula to meet the requirements of employer and apprentice; recognition of

prior experiential learning and accreditation of prior certificated learning, learning through workplace projects and University assessed outcomes. Notable additions include the allocation of 20% off the job learning time, to be recorded and evidenced by the provider, and the implicit recommendation to appoint workplace mentors. Here, the role of the employer is critical within an apprenticeship setting, not only in terms of levy distribution and resource allocation to cover the off the job learning hours, but also in the establishment of learning opportunities through a workplace mentor. Indeed, Boud and Rooney (2015) emphasise the central role of social relationships, practice and learning mediation to the success of this type of programme and are most effective when intertwined across both the workplace and the provider.

The notion of co-created curricula fits well with apprenticeship programme design given that apprenticeships are primarily jobs with substantial training and development of transferable skills, but the shift in the perceived locus of control as to where knowledge may reside remains a complex issue. Cox (2005) suggests that work-based learning models force Universities to accept that knowledge production exists beyond the preserve of academics, a view endorsed by Garnett (2015) who questions the broad perception of universities as exclusive claimants of knowledge evaluation and validation. Here, Plewa et al. (2014) endorse the benefits of joint creation of curricula in not only aligning with and supporting specific business needs but can also be leveraged by providers to naturally increase further commercial opportunities.

Yet, differing expectations between Universities and employers are potentially problematic and despite the need for Universities to become more closely aligned to employers in order to jointly develop and promote degree apprenticeships, significant cultural challenges remain in UK Business Schools. By inference, work-based learning assessment may take a variety of different forms in response to learners and their organisation's needs resulting in flexible customisation and negotiation of learning pathways and outcomes, yet this can create unpredictable and often disruptive learning environments. Much of the difficulty lies in the contextual establishment and verification of skills, largely beyond the University's control but a greater problem is variation in opportunities to learn, often affected by intangible cultures and norms (Billett, 2016). Recent research by Rowe, Moss, Moore and Perrin (2017) reveals the significant impact that high-quality mentor support can have upon workplace learning,

specifically the identification and advocacy of valuable learning opportunities, and ongoing provision of effective workplace guidance and learner support. Where support is absent, Billett's (2016) description of projects stymied by workplace pressure, management styles, culture and hierarchy seem likely to affect academic credibility, leading to assessment issues which neither the University nor the learner can control.

Here, the idea of 'flexibility', which is seen as a central characteristic of work-based learning, has implications for the associated modes of delivery and assessment methods (Helyer, 2016). Critical appraisal and reflective practice may form key assessment methods, based upon common models and components of reflection (e.g. Johns, 2017). Schon (1991) describes reflective practice as the central tenet to work-based learning in terms of one's ability to transform experience into knowledge by reflecting on, for and in action, with Biggs (1988) defining it as an interpretative and integrative process translating lower order thoughts to higher order understanding and knowledge. The expectation is that work-based learning students are empowered to question, analyse and challenge or augment established workplace practice as a result of their learning, thus developing critically reflective habits.

Harvey (2003) emphasises employer preference for engaging managers who can reflect, analyse, critique and synthesise experiences, and who can respond positively to change and broaden their reflective capacity accordingly. The social construction of effective leadership evidenced by apprenticeship portfolios detailing specific skills development may further facilitate the switch away from traditional expectations and assumptions of leadership programme delivery, towards introspective and peer questioning and synthesis of development through the application of "a reflexive pedagogic tool" (Schedlitzki, 2019, p. 242). Certainly, there is emerging evidence that work-based learning pedagogies can promote many desirable skills within healthcare settings such as resilience in nurses (Edward and Hercelinskyi, 2007). Yet despite positive outcomes, it is disappointing to note that the General Medical Council's (GMC, 2019) reflective practice guidance focuses purely upon clinical staff, seemingly excluding non-clinical administrative and other management roles.



Gray (2007, p.497) emphasises the tendency for management education to focus upon individual solo reflection rather than facilitating collective, contextualised reflective processes which acknowledge the influence of social phenomena, enabling critical enquiry “into organisational processes”. Learning is a social construct found to be most effective when it involves interaction, dialogue and shared ideas about change and new ways of working (Brockbank and McGill, 2007; Helyer, 2016). Here, team reflective practice is encouraged by the GMC (2019) fostering collective learning and exploration, through dialogue, sharing of best practice and communal knowledge to increase the chances to create positive change and improved service provision.

Orland-Barak (2005) reveals greater evidence of reflective thinking in participants who form close alliances with workplace mentors, a recommendation developed by Bulman and Schutz (2013) who endorse the inclusion of academic supervisors in facilitating critically reflective tripartite dialogue and evaluation. Here, Gray (2007) advocates implementing a series of critically reflective tools in creating optimum conditions for workplace mentoring, adopting different methods of dialogue across organisations to enable learners to draw upon multiple versions of organisational reality to formulate an informed view and enable evaluation and enquiry into perceived norms. The practice described here is a common training method adopted by higher-level teaching practitioners in mentoring trainee teachers, with research by Harrison, Lawson and Wortley (2005) evidencing improved working practices, enhanced professional independence and the effective establishment of communities of collaborative peer support. Effective supported reflective practice would contribute toward off the job learning of new knowledge, skills and behaviours. Yet, as Morley (2018) emphasises, sector policy documents and practical advice have been ambiguous, omitting to include attributes and skills for workplace mentors and creating significant disparity across the sector in terms of support provided for employer-led off the job learning.

Resource constraints coupled with cumbersome processes have also made it difficult to embed genuine work-based learning within HE programmes (Edward and Hercelinskyj, 2008). Virtanen, Tynjala and Etelapelto (2012) cite space and time as critical success factors for reflection but the increasingly commercial nature of HE is limiting delivery to highly content driven, heteronomous programmes, described by Boud and Rooney (2015) as ersatz versions

of work-based learning. A particular hallmark of the SLMDA is the compression of learning, combined with full-time, senior level responsibilities not always evident in other types of part-time Master's provision. Cohort led delivery and punishing timetables juxtaposed with the realities of the modern workplace create a challenging learning environment. Apprentices are required to adopt an ambidextrous approach to meet a series of formative and summative assignment deadlines, creating comprehensive portfolios to evidence knowledge, skills and behaviours, whilst engaging in varying degrees of critical reflective practice and simultaneously 'juggling' workplace demands.

A further complication for providers is the specific skillset required by academic staff, such as PATs, to oversee reflective practice and who themselves can challenge and innovate effective delivery of knowledge and learning to ensure that apprentices move beyond unconscious passive learning towards "explicit and intentional" reflection (Brockbank and McGill, 2007, p.72; Brown, Fry and Marshall, 2008). Learner empowerment of this type represents a shift in power from tutor to tutee, requiring supervision by an academic who is instrumental in creating opportunities to learn from practice, and who has adequate knowledge of the specific contextual setting (Morley, 2018). Yet, much of the literature assumes Brown et al.'s (2008) depiction of an early career novice moving along the continuum to become the expert, which is often not the case for this apprenticeship. The difficulty for the PAT here is the rapid mastery of a breadth of industry knowledge in both the macro and micro context, alongside the agility to support the apprentice to further develop and hone already highly developed skills and specialist expertise. Yet as with workplace mentor guidance, Morley (2018) exposes weaknesses in policy documents and sector guidance which endorse the transition towards work-based learning as core delivery through degree apprenticeships but omit to explore the qualities required for specialist academic support. Given the range of industries involved, this lack of acknowledgement of core work-based learning facilitation characteristics and skills directly counters the advice of Brockbank and McGill (2007) and as such, seems likely to become problematic as programmes progress.

Further pressure may emerge as a result of such extensive broadening of academic responsibility which requires autonomy and control over curriculum design and delivery to

ensure the proactive development of students. Recent research by Martin, Lord and Warren-Smith (2018) and Mulkeen, Abdou, Leigh and Ward (2019) suggests that multiple responsibilities as teachers, PATs, researchers, programme designers and managers, combined with new degree apprenticeship expectations from employers and professional bodies is provoking uncertainty and ambiguity over the identity and purpose of the academic role. Although Martin et al. (2018) found that student academic and career success are natural motivators for tutors, they also believe that increasing workloads and juggling of roles in a rapidly changing HE landscape have the potential to threaten academic self-worth and well-being, as well as learner development and employer/institutional relationships.

The literature discussed here highlights the effectiveness of reflective practice in providing a valuable framework to facilitate the enrichment of critical skills, central to supporting industry demand for the desired leadership qualities set out in the SLMDA Standard. However, concerns over imbalanced opportunities for individuals to learn seem likely to be magnified as a result of many other dynamic forces, validating Dalrymple, Kemp and Smith's (2014) warning of pedagogic inconsistencies as a result of the discernible shift in the locus of learning from University controlled to knowledge and skills development in the workplace. This shift has resulted in the development and design of an innovative, but resource intensive delivery model which differs significantly from its predecessors, particularly in terms of the locus of control. The literature review exposes the diversity and complexity of expectations set by employers and their employees, juxtaposed with inconsistencies in quality of and access to academics and workplace support which seems likely to result in unpredictable outcomes. As such, the paper sets out to explore the roles, challenges and experiences of the three stakeholders in developing reflective practitioners within the confines of one of the first SLMDA programmes to launch in the UK.

## **Methodology**

This study focuses on the challenges, issues and benefits experienced by public sector degree apprentices and that of their employers and provider as they complete this new variant of employer-led experiential learning. In exploring the complex set of knowledge, skills and

behaviours demonstrated by senior leaders, juxtaposed with varied resources and contexts, it became necessary to adopt an appropriate methodology. Here, Yin (2018) suggests that qualitative case studies are invaluable in helping to understand complex inter-relationships between variables and across contexts, whilst Stake's (2000) exploratory, collective case study approach enables inductive holistic exploration, a key factor in meeting research objectives. A single case study method was considered more suitable than action research due to restricted timeframes and the frequency of SLMDA learner on-programme career moves. Stake's (2000) method allows for the representation of multiple perspectives and recognition that social construction of events can affect individual interpretation and feelings, emphasising the need for case boundaries appropriate to the circumstances, for instance the organisational contexts, stakeholder profiles and associated pedagogical practice.

The investigation employs an exploratory qualitative inductive methodology to generate comprehensive data (Bansal, Smith, and Vaara, 2018). The inductive approach facilitates the development of emergent theory and reduces boundaries to generate "...a context and an arena in which actors and issues can be considered." (Stokes and Wall, 2014, p142). The research focuses upon an NHS case study organisation and as a result produces a "rich picture" and explores the phenomena within, rather than independent of, "real-world" contexts (Gibbert, Ruigrok, and Wicki, 2008).

### Data Collection

Given that the investigation adopted an exploratory inductive approach, drawing upon qualitative data, it was decided that the focus should be upon a convenience sample of a small number of accessible participants incorporating apprentices completing one of the first SLMDA programmes to launch in the UK. The case studies were formulated by gathering data from ten non-clinical NHS apprentices in senior leadership roles, ten respective line managers and three PATs who were responsible for the apprentice throughout the programme. The apprentices were working in the North West of England whilst undertaking an innovative SLMDA programme delivered by a local University. The programme offers a MA/MSc Business and Management or MBA, comprising 8 cohorts and 164 apprentices.

Data was collected through individual semi-structured in-depth interviews between February and August, 2019. By incorporating the perceptions and views of a range of key stakeholders,

rich case study material was generated (Gehman, Glaser, Eisenhardt, Gioia, Langley, and Corley, 2018). Ethical approval complied with the Trust's own protocol and CABS (2015) principles of research. Brief semi-structured interview guides were developed to allow respondents time to prepare, gather evidence and reflect upon questions, yet maintain flexibility to effectively explore the topic's complexities and strengthen the richness of the data collected (Bryman and Bell, 2015). The interviews provided the flexibility necessary for participants to discuss and relate their experiences, feelings and beliefs of being an apprentice, engaging with the programme and undertaking negotiated experiential learning. Responses were recorded and transcribed for analysis with the interviewee's permission. The adoption of semi-structured in-depth interviews enabled the participants to relate their "own story" and thereby facilitated a clearer insight into their lived experiences (Bansal et al., 2018).

### Data Analysis

The interview data was analysed and categorised soon after each interview to help obtain valid and reliable qualitative data using thematic analysis (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). Specifically, Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phase approach of thematic analysis was adopted as this offers a flexible, clear and rigorous framework that facilitates "...an iterative and reflective process that develops over time.." (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017, p.4). Utilising Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach, the identification of common themes led to the development of descriptive codes, subsequently augmented by underpinning interpretive and pattern codes. The descriptive codes were reviewed and refined to allow clustering and cross-referencing of themes to effectively incorporate the three perspectives of employer, learner and provider and actively expose layers of detail (Bryman and Bell, 2015).

To avoid fragmentation and oversimplification of data codes were also allocated for uncategorised findings with Patton's (2002) coding guidance adopted, ensuring that categories and contents were both internally homogenous and externally heterogeneous. Emerging ideas simultaneously informed "conceptual memoing" to begin the theorising of data whilst coding (Glaser and Strauss, 2017, p.83). A recursive approach meant constantly moving back and forth from the data, coding, memos and early write up, continually refining discoveries made throughout the entire process to reveal latent themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This process of 'cycling' through the data by reading and re-reading the material and traversing through the phases enabled a comprehensive and immersive exploration that

revealed similarities and differences of experience and identified recurring themes and patterns across the cases to ultimately inform higher level emerging concepts (Bansal et al., 2018).

### Limitations

As this is a small-scale exploratory study it was not intended to be representative of the wider population and as a result generalisability of findings was not an objective. However, the case study generated and synthesised a broad range of anecdotal evidence that surfaced some valuable insights relating to the challenges, issues and benefits experienced by NHS degree apprentices as they engaged in negotiated experiential learning. In terms of other potential limitations bias is associated with the data collection methods employed. In order, to minimise bias the research team cross-checked their analysis and their sense-making interpretation of the case study data (Rowe et al., 2017).

### Case Study

The provider was instrumental in pioneering the delivery of degree apprenticeships, launching one of the first open cohorts in England for the SLMDA in March 2018. At the time of writing the provider had over 200 enrolled SLMDA apprentices comprising 8% of all current UK registrations. The profile of apprentices presents a distinct shift in terms of gender, age and sector, complementing both full-time provision and an extant suite of work-based learning programmes. Facilitation of advanced reflective practice is core to department provision and therefore relevant reflective models and theories are central to this apprenticeship programme.

The NHS is the largest single employer in the region, comprising 20 Trusts each with levies ranging from £1 to £3 million, collectively providing services for 2.6 million residents (NHS, 2020). The data collected and analysed for this research was drawn from the University's largest client stakeholder, a single Trust located within the North West of England. It is a recognised centre of excellence for student training with a levy of just under £2 million. The Trust holds several relevant leadership accreditations, notably from Investors in People, the Institute of Leadership and Management and the Library Quality Assurance Framework.

### Findings and Analysis

The thematic analysis identified four key themes within which the complex and variable perspectives of employers, apprentices and tutors have been holistically integrated to expose the benefits of reflective practice; the personal potential negative consequences of reflective practice; the barriers to engaging in reflective practice; and the importance of the PAT role in developing reflective practice.

### ***The learner's perspective of the benefits of reflective practice***

An important benefit to emerge from the data highlights the potential for reflective practice to positively influence the individual learners' ability to think critically and objectively which in turn can improve self-confidence to challenge and question not only their own actions, but also those of others. When the apprentices were asked for their views of the relevance of self-reflection in terms of their progress both on programme and at work, all but one of the respondents indicated that they had developed their critical thinking skills. For instance, an apprentice who had recently secured a new managerial role explained how she thought a lot more about: *"how other people may have felt about what I was doing, if I had done things differently, what direction it would have taken me in"* (Business Intelligence Manager). This response illustrates the changing habits of reflective behaviour observed by learners, fostering an inclination towards wider reflection and critical thinking to incorporate others' perspectives. A second learner revealed how this can further encompass other facets of her life: *"I'm doing it without thinking about it to be honest. I did force myself to do it at first, but I do it now about a lot of things"* (Complaints and Incidents Manager). A wider implication here is the extent to which becoming a reflective practitioner can influence broader individual habits, not simply within the workplace but also across different contexts, yet a risk highlighted by Brockbank and McGill (2007) is passivity in learning caused by unconscious and unaware reflective habits.

The data indicates that the increased confidence derived from engaging in reflective practice has enabled apprentices to better manage their teams. When asked whether performance at work may be directly attributed to reflective practice, one respondent commented: *"Just from that one reflective piece, it put all this other stuff in motion for me. It has completely changed my relationship with the team and the way that I manage them. The team seem happier; they seem to function better"* (Operational Support Team Manager). Here, it is evident that the apprentice and potentially their subordinates have benefitted from their line manager's

enhanced reflective skills, however this is largely confined to the immediate team, often filtering downwards rather than a bottom up approach. Whilst it appears that one apprentice has examined localised social phenomena via her team, there is less evidence of scrutiny of organisational practice through collective reflection. This is a potential area of programme weakness emphasised by Gray (2007) who criticises the propensity for reflective practice to remain an insular and individualistic activity, and here seemingly restricting potential for wider impact and value for the Trust.

When asked about the programme design, the brevity of time available for reflective practice together with conflicting pressures of work and home seemed to lead to the type of superficial, shallow practice described by Brockbank and McGill (2007), and voiced by one apprentice: *"I just want to reflect on it there and then and move on, move on"* (Deputy Divisional Director). Apprentices generally felt that rapid progression through the programme and inflexible submission deadlines provided little opportunity for pause and consideration of their own development. Creating time and space to allow apprentices to fully engage with the programme and develop reflective practice was a challenge noted by all respondents, explained by one manager as: *"the nature of the service, you know we have to respond so if it means that some weeks I can release them for more time and others I can't then so be it."* (Head of Procurement). As a result, the prevalence of time and space restricted practice caused by pressure of work, study and home seems likely to limit successful outcomes, echoing the findings of Virtanen et al. (2012).

### ***The Personal Academic Tutor's (PAT) perspective of supervising reflective practice***

Given the challenges associated with being a work-based learner in full time employment it is unsurprising that the support offered by the University is of utmost importance. In particular, the PAT has a crucial role to play in the development of learners as reflective practitioners throughout the 'apprenticeship journey'. Regular contact through tutorials, workshops and workplace visits are proactive touch points which provide opportunities for bespoke guidance and advice on a wide range of issues, including reflective practice.

In their consideration of each stakeholder groups' workloads all the PAT respondents highlighted punishing academic timetables juxtaposed with modern workplace expectations, together creating incompatible conditions for effective reflective practice. For instance, one



PAT confirmed that he had insufficient time to effectively support apprentices to: *“negotiate and tweak learning outcomes so they are relevant to individual development”*. (PAT2) As Martin et al. (2018) suggest, although this degree of learner support and engagement is resource intensive it is a critical success factor for individually negotiated learning frameworks that aim to cultivate reflective practitioners. A perennial challenge facing Universities is the identification and recruitment of academics with the right blend of practical and pedagogic experience to support apprentices as they engage in work-based learning and develop as reflective practitioners. Resource issues seem likely to continue whilst Universities continue to prioritise academics experienced in didactic, paradigm bound teaching methods rather than individually centred learning (Cox, 2005, Martin et al., 2018). Despite a swathe of degree apprenticeship opportunities, demand for critical work-based facilitation skills remains less prevalent within HE than other education and training sectors.

PATs who act as the point of contact for both the apprentice and the employer, thereby creating a close tight-knit relationship, can strengthen engagement and understanding in order to collectively generate opportunities for learning and development from reflective practice. This creation of a truly tripartite learning environment (i.e. University, learner and employer) has the potential to positively shape workplace performance and outcomes (Helyer, 2016). When the PATs were asked about learner progress there were many positive examples of the potential for wider organisational benefits, with one PAT confirming: *“A student was able to adapt and extend what he had learned to influence NHS policy, ultimately synthesising back-office payroll functions across Trusts to help drive down cost and reduce the unwarranted variation of existing practice”* (PAT3).

However, there was less evidence of genuine tripartite discussion. For instance, one PAT found some managers inaccessible due to workloads, commenting that he *“had not had a conversation with anyone's line manager”* (PAT1). This reluctance from employers to engage was similarly noted by another PAT who complained that: *“so many of our mentors and managers are for some reason not available.”* (PAT2) Consequently, the PAT felt that he was *“not genuinely able to corroborate the learning supposed to have taken place”*. The findings here surface DfE (2018) concerns over providers' ability to establish and verify skills in a setting beyond their control. Weaknesses in the tripartite agreement are emerging as a result of the workplace pressure and culture, yet in this case study, evidence of those pressures are

apparent within all three stakeholder groups, rather than merely within the workplace. The perception of increased pressure upon PATs caused by a resource intensive delivery model, juxtaposed with academic credibility concerns and the ill-defined role of the employer are worrying, given the significant influence that high quality academic and workplace support can have upon effective workplace learning, specifically in the identification and advocacy of valuable learning opportunities, and the ongoing provision of effective workplace guidance and learner support.

### ***The employer's perspective of reflective practice***

The importance of working with academics with appropriate skills, experience and understanding was highly valued by the employers. When asked about their view of the delivery team one manager explained his previous poor experience with another University saying: *"It is no use to us having academics who haven't set foot in the building and don't understand our culture."* (Head of Procurement). This positive feedback was emphasised by another employer who confirmed: *"I'm very much in favour of this type of course. It's good for the learners and it's good for the Trust, especially the relationship we have built with your academics."* (Director of Services).

The findings also reveal a growing appreciation from employers of the programme's ability to enhance apprentices' individual performance as a result of their greater confidence in themselves. When asked whether a difference in behaviour had been evident one manager commented: *"Confidence in her own ability and her understanding really of how good she is in relation to the day to day operation management of the service has definitely improved"* (Head of Estates and Facilities). The data suggest that that this widespread improvement in self-confidence is subsequently influencing the tendency for individuals to more effectively challenge and question extant local business practices, making their own recommendations for positive change in an appropriate manner: *"He's prepared to contribute and has begun to put his point across and argue as well and I like that now he will challenge things"* (Head of Business Intelligence).

Indeed, there was widespread acknowledgement that apprentices had visibly changed their thinking habits since joining the programme. When the employers were asked if they had

seen evidence of improved critical thinking one Director of Operations commented: *"I does a lot of critical thinking. It's not just in a self-contained sort of silo if you like."* Another respondent described his apprentice's changing habits saying: *"She's started to think differently"* (Divisional Director). The comments suggest that the line managers had started to see a difference and in one instance, wider influence upon others in the department: *"It is having an impact upon her and us; the way she is acting, the way she is talking, the models that she is bringing. It is starting to shape the Trust and taking that in a different space."* (Head of Operations). Here, the apprentice seems empowered to question, challenge and shape the culture, highlighting the potential for her individual reflective practice to influence the type of organisational change described by Bravenboer (2018) and GMC (2019). The data suggests that reflective practice can empower individuals to form new ideas and different ways of interpreting information, leading them to engage others in constructive dialogue to further develop extant practices and cultures. This is in keeping with the prevailing view that reflective practice can strengthen core underpinning skills, help create and cope with change and enable linkage of knowledge to production (Boud and Rooney, 2015). Yet, within the data there is no evidence of wider team reflection and dialogue across the organisation to engage multiple stakeholder viewpoints as recommended by Gray (2007) and Helyer (2016). Whilst it is evident that apprentices' own working practices and that of their subordinates are changing, the extent to which they are influencing change in their workplace mentor or line manager is less apparent, exposing potentially weaker mechanisms and outputs than those of teacher trainers described by Harrison et al. (2005).

Although the majority of respondents in the study viewed the notion of reflective practice as a beneficial pedagogic framework, some were sceptical of its value particularly given the tendency for learners to only reflect on negative situations. One senior manager cited the example of an apprentice who was required to reflect upon a devastating mistake that had wide ranging organisational consequences and observed: *"If you are the wrong kind of person, I think it can, it can make them go backwards"*. (Divisional Director). The respondent here was the only manager who had in-depth experience of reflective practice, and part of her role was oversight of clinical practice, highlighting differing practice across management groups in the NHS. Yet, whilst the GMC (2019) advocate reflection upon both negative and positive experiences, it is less clear as to whether one PAT's belief that reflective practice is largely

used “*when something has gone wrong*” (PAT3) is a broader theme in clinical roles. Correspondingly, the work of Johns (2017) suggests that natural reflection is more likely to occur as a defence mechanism to feelings of discomfort after negative incidents, whereas practitioners require more experienced guidance in the type of deliberate reflection described by Brockbank and McGill (2007) to reflect upon positive experiences.

However, when the employers were asked about their own involvement with reflective practice there seemed to be little direct engagement. Here, the Head of Organisational Development confirmed that: “*Clinical areas are very strong in reflective practice, it is part of the core supervision*”. Indeed, the consensus view from the sample was that “reflective practice is something that clinicians do” (Head of Business Intelligence), congruent with GMC (2019) guidance. Speaking more broadly about leadership development and the role of reflection, the Head of Organisational Development suggested that the NHS was: “*10 to 15 years behind the private sector in terms of leadership development, resulting in huge numbers of accidental managers*.” Whilst there is some acceptance in the literature that NHS leaders may accidentally develop understanding of intellectual and emotional knowledge for effective leadership (e.g. Timmins, 2015), the King’s Fund (2019) highlights the need for managers to develop relational skills through modelling of behaviours and motivating and mentoring others to enable leadership across services and systems. Timmins (2015) describes such activities as leveraging individual managers’ “soft power” in their ability to develop subordinates through reflection and training. However, Timmins (2015) argues that not enough opportunities are provided for individuals to establish critically reflective habits, seemingly also evident in this case because the integrative mentoring process for reflection described by Gray (2007) and Orland-Barak (2005) is missing. A fundamental aspect here is that line managers themselves need to develop a clearer understanding of reflective practice and its potential benefits in order to effectively develop future leaders.

## **Conclusion**

Thematic analysis of the data gathered from learners, employers and PATs has given a rich insight into the potential benefits of reflective practice, specifically in terms of enhanced critical thinking skills and newly found confidence to take new skills and learning into their

workplace to shape organisational and cultural change. Yet, the data also reveal the negative consequences to engaging in reflective practice and warns of the potential significance of only focusing upon unsatisfactory outcomes, particularly in a healthcare setting where reflexivity is not generally viewed as a core skill in non-clinical roles. Barriers to effective reflection stem from the fast pace of programme delivery but are also caused by varied the duration and timing of quality space and time to reflect deeply, exacerbated by low levels of engagement from some line managers.

Flaws in the tripartite agreement are emerging as a result of the workplace pressure and culture, with evidence of tension apparent within all three stakeholder groups, exacerbated by an unprecedented pace of change and global megatrends evolving performance expectations across workplaces (Confederation of British Industry, 2018). By examining the role of the provider, challenges to the developing PAT role are evident, particularly in the critical requirement for them to effectively negotiate and create collaborative learning opportunities and in doing so, cultivate reflective, independent learners. Opportunities exist for experienced reflective practitioners to support apprentices' intellectual and emotional development through collaborative questioning, action and thought creating a supportive and dynamic culture. Nevertheless, the multiplicity of expectations created by degree apprenticeship delivery is exposing shortcomings, characterised by the rapidly changing expectations and increasing workload of the work-based learning academic's role, which requires adequate training and resource. The view that work-based facilitation skills are less highly prized than academic intellect persists in HE, frustrating academics that do not have the skills, time or inclination to effectively manage opportunities for individuals to learn. As such, the findings within this small case study reaffirm criticisms of MBA programmes and echo Mulkeen et al's (2019) endorsement of the need for specialist pedagogic training to enable academic teams to become sufficiently equipped to pro-actively support the gradual transfer from intensive facilitation towards Gray's (2007) notion of learners who take responsibility and ownership of their own skills development.

The apprenticeship levy was introduced to improve the quality and increase the quantity of apprenticeships to boost productivity, presenting providers with a unique opportunity to support the off the job aspect of apprentice learning in the workplace by supporting the

development of reflective activities and dialogue for line managers and mentors. Yet, the evidence here reveals an over-reliance upon the type of introspective reflection described by Gray (2007), in part caused by the apprenticeship standard whose assessment method relies upon degree completion combined with a portfolio of evidence which focuses upon learner progression. The findings suggest that whilst the programme design facilitates individual reflective learning and action leading to positive results within the immediate team environment, it fails to truly shift learners towards the type of deep organisational learning and collective action endorsed by Gray (2007) to facilitate impactful and lasting organisational change. The data described within this paper was analysed during one of the most severe global health pandemics this century, emphasising the critical requirement for organisations to adapt and thrive in an increasingly unpredictable macro environment. Providers are well placed to play an increasingly crucial role in supporting such rapid organisational reform through the support and development of critically reflective dialogue between line managers or mentors and their subordinates. Where managers and mentors are equipped to successfully engage learners in habitually challenging and critiquing organisational practices, it is more likely that Cunliffe's (2004) notion of impactful organisational transformation to boost productivity will become the norm.

The challenges described above present difficulties for providers in efficiently and effectively supporting the development of workplace mentors and line managers. The lack of guidance regarding crucial attributes and skills for work-based learning workplace mentors highlighted by Morley (2018) is of specific concern, creating a significant lacuna for providers who are responsible for a cohesive off the job learning offer. As such the findings here emphasise the need for effective training, management and support of activities as part of the programme induction and delivery, and further develop the tripartite relationship as an effective conduit between the apprentice, employer and PAT.

The research presented here reveals crucial insights into the challenges and rewards of reflective practice within a work-based learning framework. Despite the small sample size, the findings may be used to continue to develop and improve employer, learner and University practice as increasing numbers of employers and their staff engage with degree apprentices and sponsored lifelong learning in the workplace. A key point here is that the

research described has only explored reflective practice during engagement with a relatively short but intensive programme, highlighting the temporal nature of learning through an apprenticeship. As such, it remains unclear as to whether such short-term reflective practice can translate to a lifelong habit. Future research should adopt a longitudinal approach to explore the propensity of SLMDA graduates to continue to engage in reflective practice after the programme has ended. In addition, the data is drawn from one NHS Trust's apprentices, line managers and academic tutors, within one programme at one institution. As such, it is recommended that future research incorporates a range of institutions, sectors, disciplines and programmes to explore the full range of potential benefits and emerging challenges from a variety of stakeholder perspectives. Additional data drawn from an international perspective would better inform and support University apprenticeship pedagogic design. This would create an international forum for the sharing of best practice, a relevant and timely development given the potential for apprenticeship reforms in many countries across the globe.

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